

Sacred Vocation Program in a Place of Healing

Program helps health care workers recognize that it's more than a job. It's a calling.

Inside the colorfully painted waiting room at the San Jose Clinic, a little boy played quietly with his Chucky doll while his mother filled out medical forms and verified information with a polite woman at the front desk.

A grandmother slowly pushed her walker past a smiling receptionist on her way to a comfortable seat. Next to a safari mural, a man leafed through a newspaper after being greeted warmly by a staff member on his way into the room.

From the front door of the low-cost downtown clinic to this waiting room to the exam room, each of these people encountered health care workers who have been specially trained to recognize their true calling as healers.

The San Jose Clinic employees are taking part in the Sacred Vocation Program, a unique, collaborative venture developed by faculty at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston in partnership with St. Luke's Episcopal Health Charities.

The goal is two-fold. First, the program is designed to nurture the spirit of health care workers and help them acknowledge their value and connect at a deeper level with their work. The second goal is to engage the workplace in a participatory change process so workers experience meaningful work.

The developers of the Sacred Vocation Program believe this spiritual connection improves the employees' outlook on their work, and this ultimately translates to a more nurturing and compassionate environment for their patients.



Rabbi Samuel Karff leads a discussion of the caring, compassionate side of medical care.
Photo by Ester Fant

Rabbi Samuel Karff, associate director of The John P. McGovern, M.D., Center for Health, Humanities and the Human Spirit at the UT Medical School at Houston, came up with the idea of sacred vocation after his own experiences with the health care system. "As a consumer of medicine, I discovered that the hospital environment can be dehumanizing," Karff said. "Patients lose their privacy. They lose control. I began to look at what makes a hospital a place of healing. It comes down to the level of clinical care and the interaction between caregivers and patients."

Karff worked with Benjamin Amick, Ph.D., associate professor of behavioral sciences and epidemiology at the UT School of Public Health. Together they determined that if you want the health care staff to nurture patients and families, you must first nurture the staff.

The Sacred Vocation Program was born, and with the support of St. Luke's Episcopal Health Charities, Karff and Amick launched it in 2001 at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital. Close to 100 employees – mostly patient care assistants – participated in sessions that helped them find meaning in life through their work, connect their spiritual and work identities, and recognize healing behaviors.

One of their tasks was to write their own obituary, highlighting the qualities for which they would like to be remembered. Another task was for the group to develop an oath. The patient care assistants' oath focused on listening and giving hope to patients and their families, speaking in a comforting and reassuring way, healing, and honoring patients' dignity. The final line of their oath was, "Nobody can take away my power to heal."



Benjamin Amick, Ph.D.

A smaller group of patient care assistants then drew up 27 recommendations to senior hospital management for improving the work environment.

Amick said Sacred Vocation is divided into three phases. Employees first learn how to spiritually connect with their work, their colleagues and their patients.

Then they identify challenges in the workplace that get in the way of a healing environment, and they come up with ways to solve problems, develop an action plan and present it to their managers for consideration.

The last phase of the program focuses on growth and renewal. The group meets periodically to update and share experiences, assess individual successes and failures, track the effect of changes made in the workplace, support coworkers and renew their oath.

Patricia Gail Bray, Ph.D., executive director of St. Luke's Episcopal Health Charities, said the Sacred Vocation Program was so well received that the hospital adopted almost all of the participants' recommendations and instituted those changes hospital-wide.

"Individuals took away much more than a training program," Bray said. "It was a life transformation."

"The mission of the Sacred Vocation Program resonates so well with the mission of the Charities," Bray said. Because of that, St. Luke's Episcopal Health Charities agreed to formalize the Sacred Vocation Partnership with the university. Earlier this year, the Charities awarded a \$150,000 grant to continue helping health care workers experience meaning in their work, thereby enhancing the quality of patient care and service.

San Jose Clinic, a training ground for UT Medical School residents and a nonprofit United Way agency founded by the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, is one of the beneficiaries of this partnership.

The clinic's executive director, Stacie Cokinos, said in the past year, two teams have begun Sacred Vocation training. Those on the "front line" who have the most interaction with patients were the first to be trained. Shortly thereafter, administrators, including Cokinos, began attending five, 90-minute sessions to help them rediscover their work as a sacred vocation.

"It has made a huge difference in our day-to-day operation," Cokinos said. "We know each other better, and we have a deeper connection with our patients. It's a unique and special program, and it was a perfect fit for us."

"This program reminds us that we need to be grounded and get back to a healing frame of mind. We need to be calm and helpful. These are just good tools for living – not just in our work, but in our personal lives."

Because the program has connected employees more with their work, Cokinos said, she expects the clinic will see an improvement in its retention rate. The clinic is allowing full- and part-time staff to take advantage of the program, and Cokinos said she'd like to incorporate Sacred Vocation into the orientation program for new hires.

Thomas Cole, Ph.D., director of The John P. McGovern, M.D., Center for Health, Humanities and the Human Spirit, said Sacred Vocation explores the spiritual dimension of caregiving and helps employees recognize that the work is not just about clinical care. It's about hospitality.

"One of the missions of the McGovern Center is to develop programs that help transform individuals and create a more humane environment of mutual respect in the workplace," Cole said. "Sacred Vocation is a prime example of

how we are trying to do that in health care.”

Guy S. Parcel, Ph.D., dean of the UT School of Public Health, said the Sacred Vocation Program integrates what is known to be successful in both health promotion programs and occupational safety and health programs.

“This innovative program addresses an important public health problem – how to improve health care – and an important employer issue, employee retention,” Parcel said. “The Sacred Vocation Program is at the leading edge of worksite public health interventions and is a good example of the creative work faculty members are developing to improve the public’s health and the health care people receive.”

Amick said that the partnership with St. Luke’s Episcopal Health Charities will allow the university to establish the program as a national model and implement Sacred Vocation at other health care organizations.

One of the long-term goals is to establish a training program for facilitators who can lead Sacred Vocation at nonprofit service organizations, including churches, nursing homes and hospital systems. The Sacred Vocation Program already is in the beginning phases at two local nursing homes, St. James House and Seven Acres Jewish Senior Care Center.

Ultimately, Amick believes the research will show that the Sacred Vocation Program reduces turnover and increases work performance while improving patient care.

“This is not just a job for most people,” Amick said. “It’s a calling. People are trying to do the best they can, and we are trying to give them the tools they need to embrace their role as healers.”

By Meredith Raine, Public Affairs